

Congresswoman Kosmas Announces Veterans Benefits Package

Bipartisan Bills Will Protect and Improve Benefits for Florida's Veterans and Military Personnel

(Washington, DC) – Today, Congresswoman Suzanne Kosmas (FL-24) announced that she has cosponsored a series of bipartisan bills that will protect and improve benefits for Florida's veterans and military personnel. Since entering office, Congresswoman Kosmas has been meeting with veterans across the 24th District to discuss their issues and concerns. She recently held a 24th Congressional District Veterans Summit with local veterans groups in Oviedo and was the opening speaker at the Welcome Home Event and Veterans Jobs Fair in Orlando.

Kosmas's Veterans Benefits Package reflects many of the concerns being expressed by Florida's veterans. It includes measures that will prevent the Pentagon from raising health care fees for military retirees; protect benefits for spouses in the Military Survivor's Benefits Plan (SBP); give veterans better access to inpatient care while a VA medical center is closed due to natural disaster; and improve the budgeting process for the Veterans Administration to make it more transparent, accountable, and efficient.

"Since taking office less than three months ago, Congresswoman Kosmas has been very attentive to the needs and concerns of Florida's veterans," said Michael McDaniel, State Adjutant for the American Legion Department of Florida. "It is good to see that she is already following through on her commitment to veterans' issues. We look forward to working with Congresswoman Kosmas to get this important legislation passed."

"We have a duty to only send our troops into harm's way when absolutely necessary and to do everything possible to support them upon their return," said Congresswoman Kosmas. "Too often we hear about troops and veterans who face inadequate medical care, dire financial circumstances, and difficulty readjusting to civilian life. I am committed to ensuring that military personnel and veterans have access to high quality care and the benefits that they have earned – that includes funding for construction of the new Orlando VA Medical Center, which is vitally important to our community and is one of my highest priorities."

In addition to the Veterans Benefits Package, Congresswoman Kosmas cosponsored a measure that included a \$250 tax rebate for seniors and disabled veterans in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The tax relief and recovery package also provides funding for repairs and maintenance of VA medical centers as well as tax incentives for businesses that hire unemployed veterans.

Additional details of Kosmas's Veterans Benefits Package are below:

Military Retirees's Health Care Protection Act (HR 816): This bipartisan legislation is designed to block the Pentagon from passing on its costs to military retirees by dramatically raising health care fees. For the last three years, the Department of Defense proposed plans to double fees on senior enlisted retirees and triple them for officer retirees.

In response, Congress included language in the Fiscal Year 2007, 2008 and 2009 Defense Authorization Acts to prohibit increases in each fiscal year. The Fiscal Year 2010 budget has not been submitted, but it is critical to continue this law in case the Defense Department makes a similar proposal. This legislation would take away DOD's authority to increase TRICARE military health insurance premiums, co-payments for pharmaceuticals, deductibles for inpatient care, and premiums for those in the Reserves and Guard who are enrolled in TRICARE.

Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act (H.R. 775): In 1972, Congress established the Military Survivor's Benefits Plan, or SBP, to provide retirees' survivors an annuity. This plan is voluntary, purchased by retirees or provided to survivors of Active Duty service members, killed in the line of duty. It provides the surviving spouse or dependent children with up to 55% of the service member's retired pay. The Department of Veterans Affairs also provides a Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, or DIC, to the survivors of service members. Under current law, the SBP is "offset" by the DIC, reducing the total benefit bought and paid for by the service member, even if the plan is paid in full. This legislation, which currently has 130 bipartisan cosponsors, would eliminate the SBP as an "offset" for the DIC.

Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act (H.R. 1016): This bipartisan bill will improve the budgeting process for the Veterans Administration to make it more transparent, accountable and efficient. Knowing what money will be coming to them well ahead of time will help the VA acquire the personnel, equipment and facilities needed to provide the best care possible. And increasing oversight of how VA funds are spent will help ensure that the funding will be spent as it should be.

Restoring Essential Care for Our Veterans for Effective Recovery (RECOVER) Act (H.R. 1075): This legislation will give veterans better access to inpatient care while a VA hospital is closed due to natural disaster. It will allow the VA to contract with other providers or for veterans to go to VA facilities outside of their immediate area for key services while they are waiting for services to be restored if the closure time of the VA hospital in their area exceeds 180 days following a federally declared major disaster.

Belated Thank you to the Merchant Marines of World War II Act (H.R. 23): Directs the U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish the Merchant Mariner Equity Compensation Fund to provide benefits (\$1000/month) to certain individuals who served in the United States Merchant Marine (including the Army Transport Service and the Naval Transport Service) during World War II.

The Home Front to Heroes Postal Benefits Act (H.R. 707): Currently soldiers are provided with free mail from specified combat zones. However, no corresponding benefit exists for communication in the other direction, from the U.S. to the men and women serving in the Armed Forces. Military families, many of them in financial distress, are forced to bear the expense of shipping packages and letters on their own. This bill will give members of the Armed Forces serving in combat operations a free monthly postal benefit they can transfer to their loved ones, who can then send a letter or package at no cost. Members of the Armed Forces could also choose to donate their vouchers to charitable organizations, such as those that send care packages to soldiers. A similar postal benefit has been passed by the House in previous Congresses as part of the National Defense Authorization Act, but has yet to be signed into law.

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